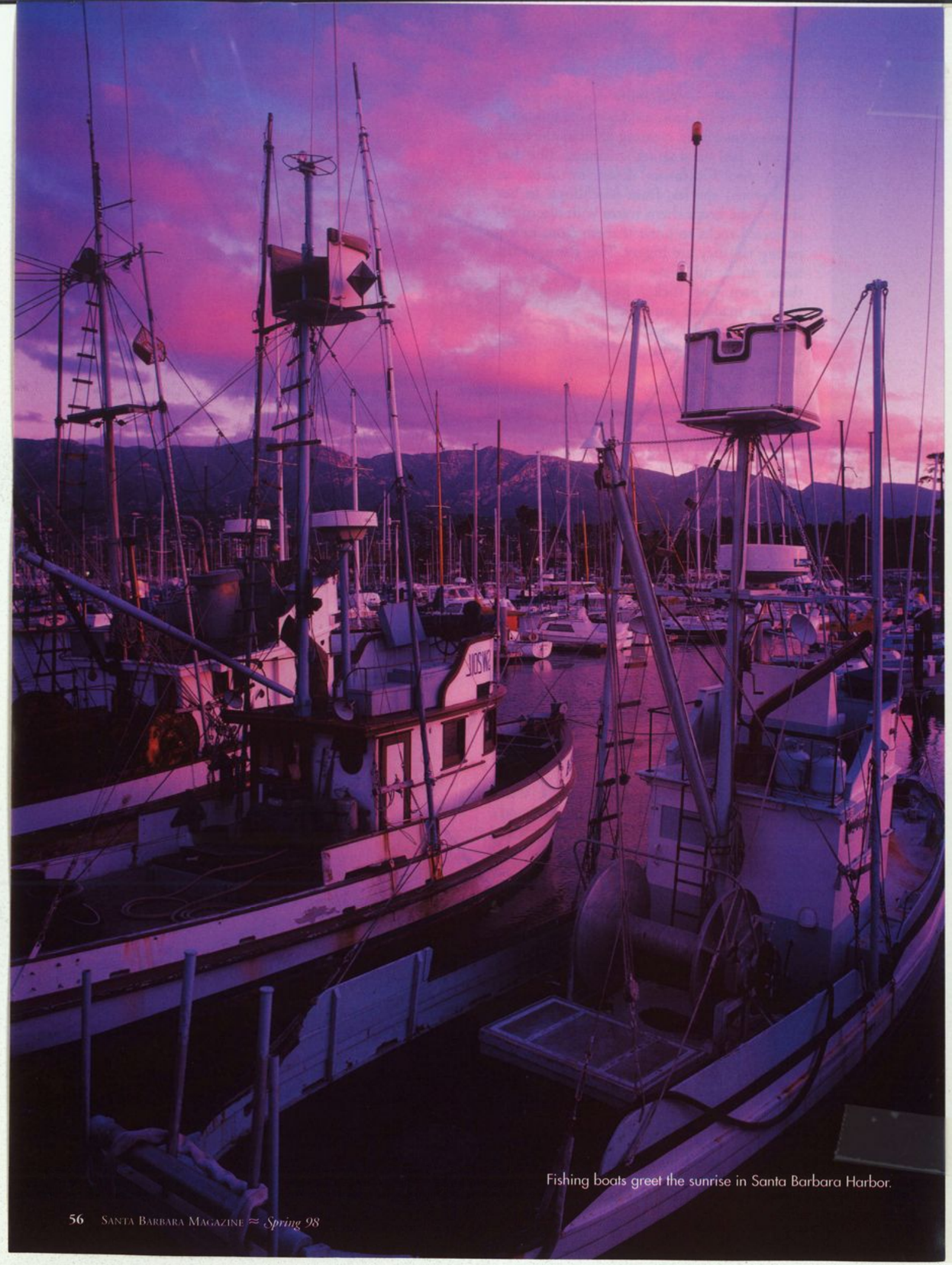

Fishing boats greet the sunrise in Santa Barbara Harbor.

CHUCK PLACE

Dancing with the DEEP

Santa Barbara's commercial fishermen face down weather, sharks, and public opinion to keep bringing in the catch.

BY HILLARY HAUSER

It is early morning in the Santa Barbara Harbor, and there is a lineup of fishermen sitting on the bench on the breakwater in front of the Coast Chandlery. It looks like the kind of day every fisherman should be out working. But on this morning the tops of the Santa Ynez Mountains are gripped by the "fingers of death," a chapeau of fog-white clouds brushed smooth by wind. Sometimes called cat's paws, these clouds look harmless, but to fishermen, they signal that in the channel, out of sight of bikini-clad sun worshippers on the Santa Barbara beaches, a fierce wind is blowing. The sea is glassy, the sky is blue, but when the fishermen in the harbor see the fingers of death, they know it's not a fit day to be out in a boat.

Cowboys of the sea, riders of the oceanic range, their clothes permanently oiled from working in their engine rooms, fishermen are frontiersmen who know the weather signs like the backs of their hands, which are gnarled and rough from handling nets, knives, and big fish with rough skins. Their boats are the rough-and-tumble drag boats, shrimpers, gill-netters. As individual as their owners, these wood and steel buckets line the commercial fish docks next to the breakwater on either side of the navy pier. Some of the boats have big spools of net at the stern. Others are tugboats, with big tires on the sides to protect them. The swordfish plank of the *Sea Brothers,* at the far end of the dock, towers above everything, and the stink of old bait fills the air.

The Santa Barbara fishing fleet is blessed each year by a padre from the mission, and they bless us with shrimp, sole, shark, swordfish, rockfish, and halibut.

Santa Barbara is a rarity in Southern California, where most other marinas (except for San Pedro) are primarily occupied by pleasure vessels in blue canvas covers. There is plenty of blue canvas in Santa Barbara, too, but this is a major West Coast fishing port, where many types of seafood are brought in and shipped to local restaurants, across the country, and around the world.

The harbor was not built with commercial fishing in mind, but within a year of its completion in 1930, Andrea Larco was fishing the Santa Barbara Channel, building up a fleet of boats and selling his catch all over California. The first of the Castagnolas had also arrived from Genoa. Gio Batta and Salvatore visited California on square-rigged merchant ships, went back to Italy to retrieve their families, and returned to Santa Barbara to set up their own fishing fleet. The familiar fishing boat *Sal C* is named for Salvatore Castagnola, whose family of three daughters and eight sons included Mario and George, who established an immensely successful seafood empire. To many of the commercial fishermen working the Santa Barbara Channel today, the Castagnola name has almost spiritual significance.

"Those who die young are the beloved of the gods," the Greeks said. Before he was killed by a great white shark off San Miguel Island in December 1994, Santa Barbara urchin diver Jim Robinson was one of the most beloved figures in the harbor, and his spirit is invoked on a daily basis by many of his friends. Every year on the anniversary of his death, urchin divers and assorted friends congregate to remember Jim Robinson with overflowing toasts of tequila, his favorite drink. Behind the bar at Brophy Brothers is a plaque with his photo, before it a little shelf holding a shot glass kept filled with tequila, like an eternal flame. On occa-

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sion the shot glass is taken down, drunk to the accompaniment of a clanging bell, then refilled and set back in its place.

The diving fishermen make their living in the "contemplation room," swimming underwater all day long with only their thoughts for company. Their boats, small, fast vessels tied end-to-end in front of the Naval Reserve Building and elsewhere in the harbor, are identifiable by the coils of air hose on the deck, the covered air compressor at the stern, and, on top of the wheelhouse roof, stacks of surfboards and net bags for the catch. Each of these boats has a two-man crew, the diver and his tender, who feeds the diver his air hose as he works underwater. From them come thousands of pounds of sea urchins, most of which go to Japan.

Tourists wandering around the navy pier at sunset love to watch the boats unload. Giant white panel trucks roll out on the pier while four or five boats jockey into position under the hoists. Big hooks are attached to large net bags full of black, spiky urchins, which are hauled high in the air, digital numbers flashing out weights before the bags are emptied into the waiting trucks.

Danger is an accepted part of life to the fishermen who work out of Santa Barbara Harbor. In fact, it may be a lure, a key partner in the dance they do with the weather, the sky, the ocean currents, the bottom of the sea, the anchorages and treacherous reefs, the sudden turnarounds in wind and swell. Their tango with the furies of Mother Nature is similar to the balancing act surfers do as they test judgment, talent, and physical endurance against a giant ocean wave. One slip-up, one unattended moment, can sink a ship as easily as a mammoth breaker can chop a surfboard in half.

"You never, ever, turn your back on the sea," a veteran fisherman told me. "The minute you think you've got it made, you're gone."

Every fisherman begins his day in the dark, listening to "the box," the marine weather radio, while lying in bed. Many a wife has complained about the interruption of sleep by the scratchy voice that announces the sizes and intervals of ocean swells on the buoys from Point Conception to San Diego.

Even when weather reports promise a safe and peaceful day, deathly surprises can rise up out of nowhere and grab a fisherman by the throat. David Tibbles (better known as "Spinucci," Italian for a type of inedible bottom shark) knows that well. His swordfishing boat, the forty-eight-foot *Pompano,* was a beloved sight in the harbor until one supposedly fit day in October 1992.

Hearing reports of big swordfish catches off the California-Oregon border, "Spinooch" and his crewman, Chad Denson, set out on the *Pompano* heading north. They were eighty-eight miles out to sea when the first big wave hit them. Spinucci tried to turn the boat upswell to dump the water, but two more waves hit, and the *Pompano* rolled over on its side. Then it went all the way over, with Spinucci trapped inside the wheelhouse. With his stocking feet, he kicked out the window, squeezed through the broken glass, and swam like fury for the surface.

In a hellacious series of miracles, the two men managed to grab the life raft, one survival suit, and the EPIRB (Emergency Position Indicator Radio Beacon). In a raging wind they climbed into the raft, zipped the Velcro flap closed to seal themselves inside, set off the EPIRB, and each climbed into a leg of the survival suit to stay warm. Then they waited, tossed about on a raging sea like dice in the hand of fate.

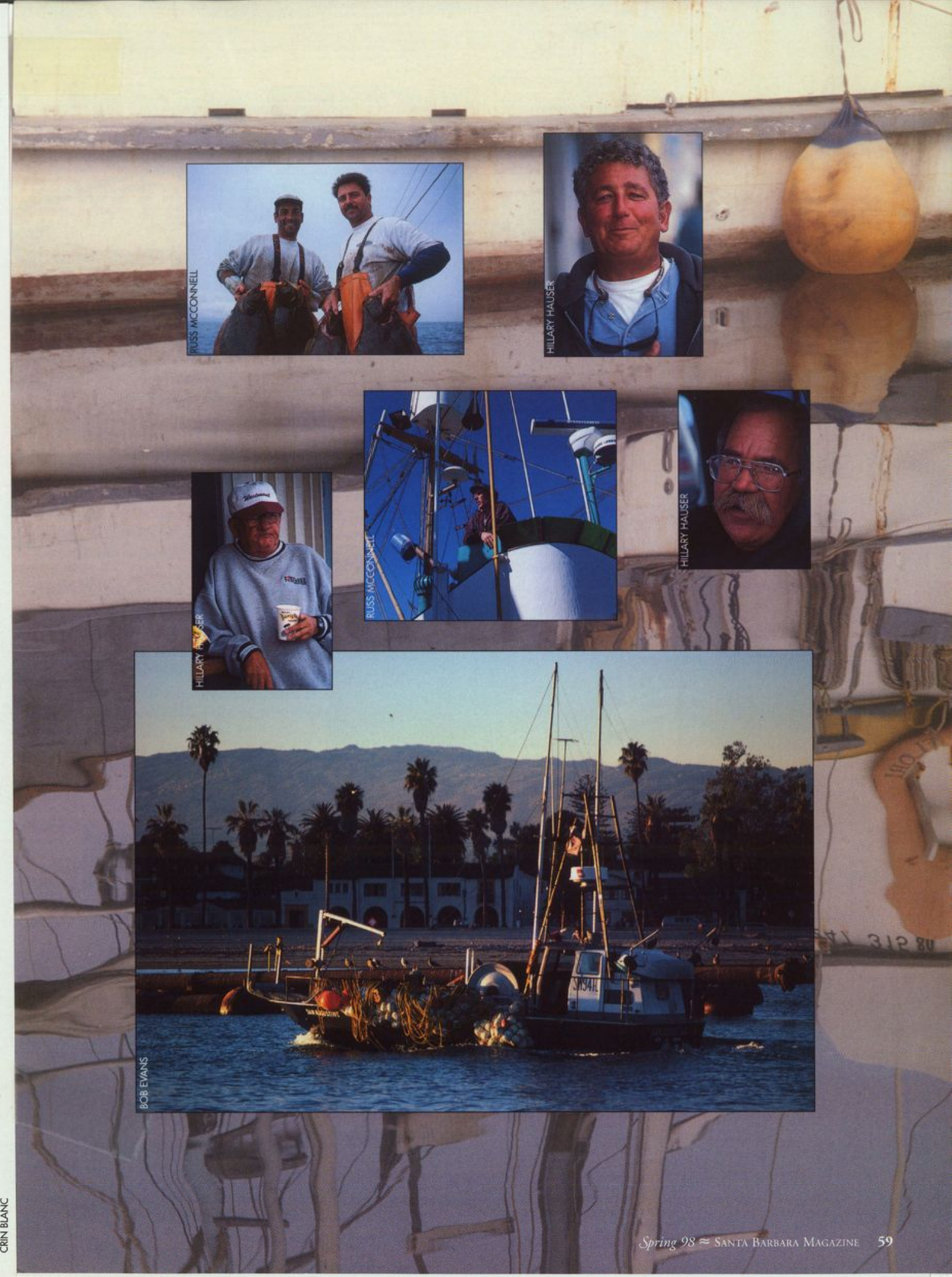
By nightfall, a Coast Guard helicopter was lowering a basket over the raft, and Spinucci and Chad were rescued. This close brush with death might send many men running to another profession, but today Spinucci fishes squid, and Chad operates his own net boat.

Spinucci says, "I love fishing, it's my life. We feel every day we get to live now is a bonus."

Spontaneity is a quality many of us love to think we live by, but in truth it is hard to embrace. We like to think we can move right or left on a whim, but the fact is, most of us are troubled if we don't have plans and know where we're landing, moment by moment.

Fishermen live by the spontaneity principle every day of their lives, simply because their day-to-day existence is governed by the weather. Their wives know not to commit them to family or social functions more than a few hours ahead, or claim the weekends for social engagements. If the weather is good for fishing, the fisherman does not stay "on the beach" unless the reason is really, really—really!—important.

In a sense, the fisherman is a true example of a "foul weather friend." He's only going to come to your house for



Opposite, clockwise from bottom: Win Swint's *San Augustine* is a net boat converted to urchin diving; harbor regular Fred ("the Bear") Sloan; Brent Laina and Cliff Kent, owners of the net boat *Sea Brothers,* holding halibut; drag-net fisherman Tony Interrante; longtime dragger Gordon Cota is active in the politics of fishing; Mike McCorkle, on the flying bridge, made the news when his nets got hung up on abandoned oil rigs while dragging the Santa Barbara Channel.

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dinner when it's impossible to get out of the harbor, when it's impossible for him to do what he really wants to do—which is to fish.

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The Santa Barbara Channel has become a minefield of hot politics, and some say fishermen are a dying breed. Abandoned oil installations snag nets. Sonic testing for new oil patches scatters the fish. The back side of Santa Cruz Island used to be closed often for military tests, and San Clemente Island is still being bombed. Boyd Reber and his deckhand were killed off San Clemente, and even though Reber's widow has had a hard time proving it in a court of law, many fellow fisherman say Reber pulled up unexploded ordnance in his nets.

On an afternoon in November, longtime Santa Barbara fisherman Mike McCorkle maneuvered his boat, *Pieface,* next to the navy pier after a day of fishing. As Asian buyers sorted through his load of sole and rockfish, McCorkle held up one chewed-up fish after another. "Harbor seals!" he snorted. "They're getting them all!"

McCorkle echoes the sentiments of many fishermen,-who believe that marine mammal protection laws have caused an unnatural population boom in seals and sea lions, which now compete with the fishermen by robbing their nets. The diving fishermen, meanwhile, wonder if the burgeoning population of sea mammals at the islands has attracted larger numbers of great white sharks, which feed on seals and sea lions.

Waking up to the messes mankind has made for years, we react with disgust and a deep need to compensate. The sin of the otter slaughter in early California must be expatiated. The moral cost of marine mammal killings will be exacted to the last farthing. The damages from old-time indiscriminate fishing practices will be paid for with one ban after another, and the fish served in California restaurants will come from Japan instead of the local fishing fleet.

Some fishermen don't know how long they can last in a world where they are viewed as environmental rapists. Out on the ocean day after day, living with the wind and waves, calculating the cycles of fish and nature to see where they can fit in, they cannot understand why they are targeted as outlaws while society turns a blind eye to such practices as dumping sewage and other lethal wastes into the sea, which can feed the world.

When the California abalone fishery was closed in May 1997, some fishermen gave up. For years the divers had traveled to Sacramento to help solve the abalone issues—overfishing, strange diseases attacking certain species, poaching, and other problems. They had offered their boats and their knowledge to Fish and Game biologists, but rarely were these offers accepted.

"Why don't you ask us?" one diver had shouted at a hearing when a $100,000 study of red abalone was approved. "We'll tell you for *nothing!*"

Some of the abalone divers have sold their boats and gone into other professions—teaching, investment counseling, construction, guided fishing tours, digging for gold in the mother lode country. But there are also divers who are hanging on with the hope that they can get something started again, that they can work with Fish and Game to rebuild the abalone fishery. They want to plant larval abalones at the islands by the thousands. In the meantime they are diving for urchins.

This switch has created an additional strain on the sea urchin resource, with more divers scratching around for fewer fish. Urchin divers report a significant, worrisome loss of income, and among those hanging on for dear life, some have sold their homes and moved into less expensive digs or even onto their boats.

In the middle of this last-minute footwork to stay afloat, another potential bomb is about to drop on these men of the sea: Harvest Refugia, which has been called for in a marine conservation bill introduced in the California legislature in 1997. Harvest Refugia would create "marine replenishment" zones in the Channel Islands, shutting down approximately twenty percent of the island fishing grounds. To the sea urchin fishermen, these are political fingers of death that pose an even bigger threat than bad weather.

Nevertheless, they go to sea, working and hoping for the best. These are the fishermen who can live no other way than to be on their boats at the islands, anchored in a cove with pelicans squawking overhead, the bloops and snorts of elephant seals competing with the noise of the wind and the air compressor, where sea gulls stand on bloated sea lion carcasses and the ocean swell undulates through the kelp bed.

It is the only world they want to know. ≈

Hillary Hauser, a frequent contributor, has written many articles and books about the ocean.

Opposite, clockwise from lower left: hauling in the nets; Dana Enlow's *El Capitan* was run over by a freighter and sunk in the Channel in December 1981; stormy weather; running on autopilot and cleaning the pilothouse window in the fog; "doors" seen at the stern of the *Elsie B.* sink and spread apart as they are let out on cables, opening the net.